ASSURING THE NEGRO ROOKIE A SQUARE DEAL

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Negro soldiers at Camp Meade, Maryland, developing into first class fighters

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Three prize winners of a company of colored engineers in France

Camp Community Service Eliminating Social Snares in Path of Colored Soldier and Organizing Positive Influences That Send Him Abroad Fit and Self-Respecting

By Rebecca Drucker

WHEN the history of the forging of our many diverse and conflicting elements into a citizen army is written it will be found that the smelters, as they poured the negro element into the melting pot, did it in a gingerly way and then stood back to see if there would be an explosion. Whether it would blow up or fuse into the whole no one could tell. And that it has fused is due to the fact that for the first time we have handled this material in an intelligent way.

In the early days of the planning of our National Army one of the great problems of the Administration was finding sites where large bodies of negro troops could be trained. In a spirit of complete abnegation Georgia said that Ohio, having shown such sympathy for the negro since its abolition days, could not fail to welcome him to train there. Ohio politely but hastily rose to disclaim any desire to uproot the Southern negro from his home. It would be far better, said Ohio, to train him in the familiar surroundings of the South. South Carolina suggested Long Island, and Long Island returned the suggestion to South Carolina with thanks.

The quartering of troops aggravated by the race question brought to communities visions of undeniable dread—the memory of riots in Houston and Brownsville. Which makes the fact more remarkable that large bodies of negro troops are now being trained in both Southern and Northern communities, and there is no disorder.

The intelligence in the handling of the negro has in large part been supplied by the War Camp Community Service, which forms the right wing of the War and Navy Departments' Commission on Training Camp Activities, headed by Raymond B. Fosdick, which was formed by the President in the earliest days of the war.

Has Special Lookout For Negro Soldiers

This national commission takes in all the effort on behalf of the soldier outside the camp. The Y. M. C. A. work supplies most of the needs of the soldier inside the camp. For greater efficiency the work of the commission outside the camp has divided itself into two wings—the Law Enforcement Division and the War Camp Community Service. The law enforcement work lines up all the agencies by which the areas surrounding the training camp are, through legislation, through police and detention work, through education in social hygiene and clinical work, made safe for the soldier. So thoroughly has it done its work that it is said in some communities there is no cleaner place than the five-mile area surrounding a camp.

The War Camp Community Service does the constructive social work that is essential to the building of that mysterious and potent force—morale. At the outbreak of the war there was no time to form new organizations—it simply went up and down jerking awake dormant organizations, assisting some, consolidating others. All the welfare work that is done in behalf of the soldier outside the training camp is its concern.

For example, your boy in Camp Gordon, Georgia, writes you that there was a swell entertainment near the camp last night—Charlie Chaplin, Garaldine Farrar, Houdini or some such top-liners. And you needn't worry about his being homesick. He's got acquainted through a church sociable with the nicest kind of family in town—drops in to see them every time he gets to town. And, don't smile—just for the joke he's joined the community chorus—sings bass. That dance the Odd Fellows gave the boys last Saturday night was a hummer. There's to be another next Saturday night, given by the King's Daughters. Well, behind all these activities stands the War Camp Community Service, working through all the agencies in a community, letting them have all the credit, merely lining them up, raising the funds locally and supplementing shortages from its national treasury, setting all the wheels in motion and seeing that there is no duplication of effort. To many people with sons and brothers and husbands in the army the War Camp Community Service is not even a name, so unobtrusively does it work.

Negro Neglected Outside of Camp

But its work among the negro troops has had to be of a more intensive character. His need was so much greater and the field so much less explored. The negro was usually sent to train in the same camp with white soldiers—but wholly separated from them. He had his quarters in another part of the camp, his own Y. M. C. A., his own place for religious services—but there was not the same solicitude on the part of townspeople to entertain him outside the camp. His days on leave might be spent in an aimless or dangerous wandering about the town, or he might gravitate to what dives had not yet been closed in the camp town. In either case something would be sure to happen that would justify the worst suspicions of the not too kindly disposed townspeople. To avert serious disturbance needed work of insight and foresight. Because this work seemed so important the Rockefeller Foundation has made a special gift of $25,000 to have the whole programme worked out at once in a typical camp community.

This money is to be spent under the auspices of the War Camp Community Service in conducting a single, special experiment. It is to go toward forming a model community centre for negroes, men and women, that will prove to other camp cities what can be done in making the negro a positive factor in the winning of the war. It is something over and above the regular work of the War Camp Community Service that the gift of the Rockefeller Foundation enables it to do.

To go back a little. There was an element in the South at the outbreak of the war that hoped for the exemption of the negro from military service. This element resented his loss industrially. It looked for the rising of violent antipathies in the sight of a "cocky nigger in uniform." It marked apprehensively the arming of a force that might even prove a hostile element. The cheering for colored troops marching into encampment was faint.

On the part of the negro, he was drafted into service for a war whose aims, in the nature of things, were, with rare exceptions, incomprehensible to him. He had his apprehensions too—being herded and discriminated against were only a few of them. The burden of responsibility of being obliged to fill one of the cardinal duties of citizenship bewildered him. He had little heart for the thing at first.

We now accept the fusion of the negro into our National Army as so much a matter of course that we scarcely wonder what were the forces at work with him. So quiet and intensive were they that unless we know something of them there is great danger that with the passing of the war we will discontinue them—and so lose something of incalculable value.

Organizing Outside Influences for Good

The forces within the camp that are bending him to habits of discipline, understanding of fair play and respect for himself would be so much wasted effort if the old conditions of bootlegging and vice, license and brawling which surrounded a camp lasted as in former war times, when a training camp was likely to be a scourge to a community. The Law Enforcement Division has done its work well. Where whiskey is exiled the greatest force for evil is eliminated. But this is a negative element. The positive work of surrounding the negro with conditions favorable to his development, of studying his needs and thereby helping him to help himself, has never been attempted seriously before.

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Negro selected men on way to Camp Upton

The War Camp Community Service, as its first act after the gift by the Rockefeller Foundation, organized the following committee, which is making a special study of the negro situation: Joseph Lee, chairman War Camp Community Service; John L. Einstein, Virginia secretary, who is to be in charge of the work at Newport News; James H. Dillard, Wallace Buttrick, Thomas Jesse Jones, Frank W. Darling, James E. Gregg, L. Hollingsworth, Wood Jackson Davis, George Foster Peabody and Julian Rosenwald.

To gain a sympathetic comprehension of the workings of his mind and his racial aspirations this committee on negro work at its first meeting added to its membership five negroes of recognized achievement—Major Robert R. Moton, president of Tuskegee; Emmet Scott, aid to the Secretary of War; J. M. Gandy, president of the Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute; George E. Haynes, assistant to the Secretary of Labor, and Mrs. Harris Barrett, director of the Virginia State School for Colored Girls. Most negro educators believe that salvation must come to the negro by his own effort. Others can help a little or hinder a great deal.

The committee first sent out T. S. Settle to make a survey of the conditions surrounding camps where there are negroes. Mr. Settle is young, dynamic and a Southerner. He understands the Southern negro and the Southern white.

His survey was chiefly in the South, where the Jim Crow laws bar the negro from every first class entertainment. He found that the negro on leave must satisfy his play instincts in questionable dance halls, inferior moving picture houses and in what resorts he could find. Negro Y. M. C. A.'s, where they existed, were feeble. The whites of a community were indifferent. Curiously enough, Mr. Settle encountered opposition on the part of negro preachers. Their uncompromising orthodoxy made them look with suspicion on the suggestion that they open their churches to entertainments for the soldiers. It would establish, they feared, a precedent of frivolity and laxity in the Church. In so many cases, too, preachers had warned their congregations against the immorality of the soldier that he was looked on suspiciously.

Breaking Down Religious Prejudice

To break down these prejudices Settle called meetings of leading colored people, especially teachers and preachers, and explained that where they refused the colored soldier decent entertainment they drove him to the other sort. He roused their pride and their patriotism. He formed a committee among them and went on to the prominent white people. To them he explained the advantages of directing the energies of the colored soldier in an orderly way—and roused them to their responsibility. The usual procedure then was to levy upon each camp town a certain amount to be raised locally—to be supplemented by a certain amount from the national treasury.

Where there was a colored Y. M. C. A. already in existence it was bolstered up. Where there was none, whatever suitable building was available was taken over and put into condition. In Petersburg, Va., they found a building that had had a feeble existence as a colored Y. M. C. A. It flickered out after a brief period of life and its place was taken by a colored dance hall of questionable repute. When the War Camp Community Service took it over it made thorough renovation. In the process it had to blot out such expressive reminders of its previous existence as the signs "No shimmy-wabbling allowed" and (tribute to the "razor-toting nigger") "No gutting allowed here."

Then a mass meeting was called at the camp, at which the men were asked to state what entertainment they wanted to have furnished them. R. C. Stearns, an organizer, making a report of the meeting, says: "I have never seen a more responsive or grateful body of men. To have a nation or a city with the most benevolent intentions come to them and say 'Now what do you want—for we are trying to give you exactly what you want?' was a revelation to them."

The men asked for the following: Club or rest rooms; good toilet facilities; writing facilities; typewriter, Victrola, piano; sleeping quarters; opportunity to attend church; opportunity to spend several hours and take a meal in respectable homes; special gatherings in the club with opportunities to meet women; pool tables. The last was too much for a tall negro preacher who was present at the meeting. "Pool!" he shouted. "We need Jesus, and here comes a nigger talkin' pool." No hissing greeted this rebuke; on the contrary, there was prolonged applause.

The articles they asked for could be furnished to them easily enough. But to meet the greater social need of the soldier required the creating of a negro community life that should express itself through native channels. To express his spiritual and emotional life it would have to be motivated largely by religion and music. In these two are the greatest allies for his education.

The War Camp Community Service ranged up its churches. Once convinced, they worked with a will—they gave church suppers and dances, picnics and prayer meetings; they urged the hospitality of members toward the soldiers. Then the Community Service organized the great community sings—that start with "Over There" and "Star-Spangled Banner" and finish up with crooning, poignant "spirituals," men, women and children taking part. No one who does not know the negro understands the degree of spiritual and emotional satisfaction the negro gets out of music. It intensifies and purges his every mood.

But the churches might welcome him and his fellow negroes fall to the work of entertaining him with a will—he still had no place where he might go at will and where certain practical provisions, like a decent place to eat and sleep, would await him at any time. This necessitated establishing central quarters for him, which has gradually developed into the larger idea of a community centre.

The Rockefeller Foundation's gift of $25,000 is to be spent in erecting such a model community centre for negroes in Newport News. It has stipulated that the money shall be spent in one model community centre to serve as a demonstration to other cities of what can be done. Newport News was chosen because its need is perhaps the greatest. There are five camps in close proximity to the town. A plot of ground is to be bought and laid out as a playground, with a baseball and athletic field as its main features. On it is to be erected a large building that will have on its first floor a reception room with writing facilities, books, magazines and comfortable chairs, and an auditorium in which will be given motion picture shows, concerts, etc. On its second floor will be dormitories, showers, lavatories and offices. Club rooms already opened will be turned over to girls' clubs and Red Cross, etc., when the new clubhouse is ready.

The activities of the women will centre here. For the problem of what to do for the soldier is twofold. On its reverse side it automatically presents the question: "What is to be done for the women of a camp town?" Without direction they form more than half the problem. In fact, they provide a whole problem of their own. So in the plan for a model community centre is included a community house, where the women may spend their impulses in war work. In this second building there will be rooms for Red Cross work, a Y. W. C. A. canteen, classes in conservation, all for women.

Planned for Use When Peace Comes

The significant fact in all this is that it is being planned for permanence. It may require modifications to suit it to uses in times of peace, but the need for it will be just as great. For the community centre aims at something larger than war work—it aims to satisfy the need of the negro for expression in healthful, normal channels. It will be a place where he will be free from the furtive, degrading consciousness of inferiority. He will learn there to bear himself like a citizen—and so eventually be one.

The negro is more susceptible to influences than the white—good as well as bad. Music and the fervor of religion are the most powerful factors in working with him. That means that he can be reached by simple means. A social worker said, "In making the negro happy and getting results you can do more with five dollars than you can with a hundred for the white."

And after a year of this work it is already having its result. A negro soldier coming to town goes about his business. He knows he has his place in the community. He bears himself well and the townspeople treat him accordingly. It all bears directly on his work within the camp—which in the final analysis is the work of winning the war. It shows itself in his zest, in his company pride, and, most critical test of all, the attitude of the white troops toward him. Ask any white officer what he thinks of his negro soldiers. He will tell you of their unfailing good nature, of their quick response to a call and their desire to please whom they respect. A white leader prefers to believe that the negro would rather have a white leader. It gives a paternal touch to his attitude toward his troops which the men like. But it has been shown that they stand up just as well under colored leadership. The life of most of them is, perhaps for the first time, filled with purpose. As a civilian the negro worked spasmodically and lived an irregular, if sometimes cheerful, existence. In the camp he works harder, but is fed and housed better. He is in fine physical trim, his energy is directed and he is achieving a greater measure of respect.

He is having the time of his life. On the long marches his singing never flags. He pours out his inexhaustible heritage of songs. Some of the good old classic rags have been revamped and given a military cast. "It Takes a Tall, Dark Gal to Make a Preacher Lay His Bible Down" is now "It Will Take a Tall, Dark Man to Cut the Kaiser Down." And his fighting spirit—just mention to a colored soldier that you think his regiment is destined for stevedore service overseas! You'll start trouble.

He is wonderfully responsive to the entertainers that are sent to him in camp, but he has a great fund of native talent that he just can't suppress. Every once in a while it breaks out and carries off the laurels. The white soldiers of the same camp, hearing of it, clamor to be shown, and then follows an interchange of local talent. A camp often prefers its negro talent to professionals, and very often these are so good that they are sent out on a tour of the camps.

The most marked result of all is shown in the quotas of drafted negroes who are continually coming into camp. Where at first they came fearfully, and sometimes sullenly, they come now cheerfully, knowing they will be fairly treated. Consequently, it takes half the time to make a good soldier of him. All this has penetrated to their families at home. It has enlisted them, too—conservation, the Red Cross, Thrift Stamps, Liberty Bonds—they have adopted the whole programme of war work. The service flag is, perhaps, even a trifle more overworked there than it is in white quarters. Johnson, the husky negro who captured seven Boches at an outpost and marched them into camp at the point of his bayonet, was asked how he managed the seven. He is reported to have replied: "I just had to get seven. They've got me on seven service flags back in the States." The seven, it was figured out, were his church, his Sunday school, his job, his lodge, his mother, his wife and his ex-wife.

The War Camp Community Service attempts to raise as much money for negro work among negroes as it can, but, of course, it must be satisfied to get a small proportion of the required funds from this source. It is a significant testimony to the rousing of social consciousness that the money which is raised locally comes largely from white people. In Petersburg, Va., where $15,000 was raised, $8,000 was cheerfully given by white men for negro work. Here at last is the placing of social responsibility. Race prejudice laid aside for the duration of the war cannot return with quite so much force. Segregation may be as complete as before, but it is not fraught with so much bitterness.

In utilizing the negro's patriotism in this war we are at last beginning dimly to realize how much we have overlooked heretofore in taking stock of our national resources. The spirit of the negro that, almost unaided, is beating out its way to civilization and culture—that incredible, indomitable spirit of Booker T. Washington—is something we cannot afford to waste in our national life. There is a special reassurance for those who believe in the hope of negro citizenship in what Major Robert R. Moton said to the people of his race in a recent address at Hampton Institute: "The most important and vital business that faces America is that of preparing people to fight. We are fighting not simply to kill men—that is an incident—but fighting to kill autocracy. In justice and fairness, it is not necessary for colored people as a rule to emphasize the importance of loyalty and patriotism. They have always had it. It is right, however, to reëmphasize their importance. Passive indifference is dangerous among any people, white or black. Every American should give his country everything that he has, every ounce of loyalty, sympathy and backing. We are going to do all we can to perfect ourselves in our attitude, conduct and spirit toward our country. That will make the morale which ought to be back of our government and back of our men in the trenches. We must stand by our President and his advisers."

Community Service To Raise $12,000,000

All this cannot fail to have its leavening power on the negro problem. It is largely a matter of education, and, like the rest of us, the negro will emerge better educated. The War Camp Community Service has seized on the war as the pretext for doing a work of education that is necessary at all times. The cornerstone is laid for fine work.

The work of the War Camp Community Service as a whole has had too little recognition by the general public. It is second to none in importance. It is doing a creative work among soldiers, white and black, that will stand in times of peace. Next October the War Camp Community Service plans a drive to raise $12,000,000 for the national work. Along with the dollar that you are putting away for the Red Cross and the Y. M. C. A. put away another for the War Camp Community Service, for it belongs to that noble company.

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Sentry box outside negro regimental headquarters in France with warning horn for gas attacks